

SWEPT AWAY

Jody Hobbs Hesler

Roger had been in the middle of his morning shave when he heard the news about the rogue wave on the radio. Now, hardly two hours later, he was halfway through security at Dulles. One person swept into the sea from six billion or so on earth, from several million in the San Francisco area, from however many legions of visitors to Point Reyes Seashore each year: what were the odds that the person—yet-to-be identified—had been his daughter, Mina? It was crazy, he knew, to hop on the first available flight from Dulles to San Francisco for fear that his twenty-five-year-old daughter had been swept into the sea, crazy not even to call ahead in case she wasn't there, afraid of what her absence might mean.

But Mina had mentioned in an e-mail or birthday card he remembered from years ago that she'd spent time at Point Reyes, so it wasn't impossible that the person he'd heard about on the radio was his daughter. Non-zero

odds were enough to speed Roger's heartbeat, to keep him jerking his head toward his watch, cursing the people in front of him, as if his impatience could make the line move faster.

"You seem nervous this morning, sir," the security man said, pulling him out of the regular line, running a wand up and down his arms and legs.

"What's next?" Roger snarled, "the cavity search? Or can I get on the plane?"

"We're just being thorough, sir."

Be thorough with the terrorists, Roger felt like snapping, but they kicked people off planes nowadays for being hostile. So Roger took a deep breath. "You're right. I'm sorry. Just worried about my daughter."

The security man looked at Roger several beats past normal, maybe trying to measure whether Roger was a nut job or just a sympathetic man in his middle-fifties with a bona fide daughter off somewhere suffering.

Eventually he nodded. "Good luck with your daughter, sir."

Everything else this morning had happened in a blur: hearing the radio article, thinking of Mina, throwing his GPS and an old letter with Mina's address on it into a bag, speeding to the airport in the half-dark of early dawn, getting hassled in the security line. But now he faced a six-hour flight, cramped against the seat in front of him.

The flight attendant demonstrating drop-down oxygen masks at the front of the plane looked like a twenty-years-earlier version of his first wife, Janet: petite, brown hair curling in toward her face, breasts and ass straining slightly against her uniform, giving him something to think about while she pattered on about what to do if the plane crashed.

Jesus, if the plane went down in the middle of the country, they'd all be as dead as that person who got swept out to sea. Roger squirmed. They weren't even in the air yet. How many more emergency procedures could there be? He tugged at the neck of his Oxford shirt, feeling choked.

You don't even know if she'll talk to you. The words came as clear as if the flight attendant had spoken them, but she was holding up the airplane seat-cushion-cum-life-preserver, explaining how to grab onto it if they plunged into a body of water. So many ways to die.

The flight attendant was right though, even if she hadn't said it. Roger had no idea if Mina would talk to him, if she turned out to be alive.

With the safety instructions over, the plane was no longer taxiing but hurtling forward on the runway, lifting, lifting. To prevent anyone else from telling him he seemed nervous—or that his daughter might reject him—Roger plugged the airline earbuds into his ears, clapped his arms across his chest, shut his eyes. He only looked up whenever the sexy flight attendant walked by. He even bought a mini-whiskey to keep her near for a few extra

seconds.

Janet still looked this good back when Roger had divorced her, when Mina was only four and had stood crying while he packed his things to leave. Having the not-Janet standing next to him now—her flowery scent hanging thick in the air as she planted the whiskey on his tray table—reminded him of why he'd fallen for the real Janet all those years ago, before she'd overheard that raunchy phone call with Lizbeth, who eventually became wife number two. That had been bad luck—bad luck that Janet had overheard that call; bad luck he'd rebounded into Lizbeth's waiting arms; bad luck Lizbeth eventually thrust an onyx paperweight into his eyebrow at the end of an argument, leaving him with his next divorce and a scar that made him look a little post-mafia even now.

Roger belted back the whiskey, clamped his hands into his armpits, forced his eyes shut again. He didn't want to be bothered by anybody, past or present. He just needed to get to his daughter.

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At SFO, he made straight for the Avis. The line was long. When the clerk finally got to him, it was only to say that all their rentals were taken. Roger's watch said six-thirty. Bleary-headed from travel and weighing travel time against the time change, he got confused about which direction he should adjust his watch to now. The fog outside made it impossible to judge by sunlight. Regardless, his trip had taken too long.

At the third rental car kiosk, when it was Roger's turn, he begged: "I'll take anything. Please? Anything." This clerk handed him keys.

Inside the runty rental car that smelled of wet-dog-mixed-with-peanuts, he untangled his GPS, found the socket for the cord, entered the return address from the envelope he'd packed, and stuck the GPS onto the windshield. As he was leaving the lot, the GPS thumped to the dashboard for the first time.

Even when the display screen *wasn't* facing the floor, it was hard to follow the prissy voice's directions in the midst of unfamiliar fog-shrouded roads. By the fifth time the GPS fell, Roger was lost. He pulled over and, this time, licked his fingers and rubbed the spit against the suction cup to keep the thing in place. When he looked up, he found himself in a parking area off a Pacific Coast beach.

Roger had traveled up and down the East Coast, back and forth to Europe, but he'd never seen the Pacific, and it surprised him. His head still

murky, he suddenly felt as if Cherise, his most recent ex-wife (number four), was there exhaling beside him. *Well, what did you expect?* With her, no matter what he'd expected, it had been wrong.

He got out of the car for a better look. What *had* he expected? Sunshine maybe? A surfboard under every arm?

Not this, anyway: the bullet-grey grimness of the Pacific, a thick muff of fog, spitty mist hitting his nose. Waves, slowly gnawing their memory into the shore: they would eat anyone's young alive. Why not Mina, then? What would protect her?

The spit trick worked, and this time the GPS stayed put. It took Roger most of an hour to get back into the city, and even more time for him to decipher which building the GPS meant when it began to insist he'd reached his destination. Then he had to figure out where to park. He only hoped his daughter was still living here.

It was a lousy building, but Roger was sure the funkiness of this part of town was what had attracted Mina. You could hear Middle Eastern music from a restaurant half a block away, and across the street was a Balkan bakery, closed for the day.

On the porch, paint from the woodwork was curling off in chunks. Roger brushed a coil of it aside while he searched mailbox labels for Mina's name

and the apartment number from the corner of the envelope.

When he found 2E, he didn't recognize the names below it. If he pressed the button there, someone inside would say *Who is it?* and even if that someone turned out to be Mina, *It's your father* would sound strange. It would take more than that to explain why he was here. But as soon as he pressed the buzzer, another buzzer sounded at the building's front door, letting him in.

He trudged up a dank stairwell and down a dark hallway across ugly threadbare carpeting. The distressed plaster walls were painted a drab green. Maybe at one time the green had not been drab, or maybe it wasn't drab in the light of a clearer day, but in the foggy dimness of an early fall evening, walking down that hallway to learn if his daughter was still alive, it was so drab that it leached the last vestige of energy from Roger's legs, which fell heavy and stump-like toward what he hoped was still her door.

When he came to 2E, the door stood ajar. He could see bangs and eyeballs through the slit between door and doorframe. The eyes saw him, widened, stayed wide. Clearly she hadn't been expecting Roger, but she didn't turn him away.

It was Mina: five foot two, short black hair, bangs cut in a severe straight line, black eyeliner making her eyes severe as well. It was cold, but her feet were bare. Her toenails were a creamy red. She wore toe rings. She was

alive.

“Dad?”

He nodded his head, but words wouldn’t come yet. His throat had tightened into a fist, but inside his head he was crowing: *Mina! Good God Almighty, you’re alive!*

She said his name again, then dropped her hand from the open door and stood back to let him in. It wasn’t a welcome, but she had at least talked to him.

Inside there was a lot of purple: Chinese-style paper light shades, Indian fabrics on furniture and hanging on walls or as curtains in doorways. Everything smelled like cloves, and crowds of plants seemed to reach for Roger. Mina seated him in her tiny kitchen at an old Formica table. It was clean, but damaged. Anyplace else, it would’ve looked like trash.

She padded over to the stove, fiddled with a kettle, set it to boil. “I only have herbal,” she said, opening a cabinet and revealing a stock of tea boxes, daintily printed with soothing names arranged across tigers and lily pads. “You look like hell. No offense.”

“None taken. I feel like hell.” They were silent until the kettle clattered to a boil. Mina prepared some orange-smelling tea and set it in front of him, along with a spoon and a plastic bear full of honey.

She then took the seat across from him and shook her head while she

studied his face. “Dad, Dad, Dad. What the hell are you doing here?”

The straight-up answer sounded stupid in his head: *You wouldn’t believe me if I told you! I was shaving at six this morning when I heard this crazy bit on the news. Next thing I know, here I am!* So instead he said, “What are the other names on your mailbox?”

Her stark makeup accentuated the narrowing of her eyes. “What kind of question is that?”

“It’s just that this apartment looks too small for roommates.”

The kitchen they sat in was small, and it looked out toward a small living room. One doorway probably led to a bathroom, the other to a bedroom.

“I don’t like people knowing I live alone, so I left the old names up. A little protection for a woman living alone.”

“Not much protection,” Roger said. He was still thinking of the bitter Pacific Ocean, not far enough away from them here to make him feel safe again. “And you didn’t even ask who I was at the door just now.”

“It’s broken,” Mina said. The tone of her voice indicated that any patience she’d had for her father was thinning by the second. “It automatically opens any time a button gets pushed.”

“Jesus! That’s so dangerous!” He could feel his eyebrows lifting high into his forehead, his heart rate amping up again.

“Why are you here?” Mina asked again. When again he didn’t answer,

she gave up. She returned to the counter and the cabinet and fixed herself a cup of tea. Her metal spoon clanged against the mug.

When she sat back down, Roger couldn't read her expression. He almost flinched when she reached a hand toward him. "Your hair," she said, lifting a curl, "it's all grey. When did that happen?"

"I prefer saying silver," he said, and laughed. She dropped the lock of his hair, and it tapped against his forehead. "It wasn't like this the last time I saw you?"

Mina cupped her tea in both hands, hunching herself over it, keeping her eyes from his. "Do you even remember when you saw me last?"

If he'd imagined Mina asking such a question before he was sitting here in front of her, the words would have roared, her face crinkled in reproach. But when she looked up again, her face was all soft lines, her eyebrows creased more with pity than with blame.

"A couple of years?" he said, guilt clenching his belly.

"Six," Mina said. "I haven't seen you in six years, Dad." The soft lines on her face hardened a little at this. Somewhere in that time frame her college graduation had happened, to name just one thing, though he remembered sending a card for that.

It had started over the phone when Mina, then nineteen, had told him, "I'm cool with you getting married again, Dad. It's just that I'm a grown-up

now, you know? This won't be a person I'll ever know that well. So I don't want to be a bridesmaid this time. Not to be cruel, I just don't want to be in the wedding party." Roger could tell the words had been hard for her to say. Her voice had shaken; he'd heard her swallow in the middle, interrupting herself.

It was useless now, ridiculous even, to explain how hurt Cherise's feelings had been, especially since Cherise had been gone from his life for a year already. At the time, he'd said Mina was busy with finals, so couldn't she come to the wedding as a guest instead? But Cherise had said if Mina wasn't a bridesmaid, then she didn't love her father enough, didn't love Cherise enough. So she'd uninvited her to the wedding, stopped answering the phone if Mina's name showed up on caller ID, didn't notice or mind when it stopped showing up altogether.

At first Roger had called, written cards, sent an e-mail now and then. Now and then became less frequent. He still sent money on her birthdays.

In all the time since Cherise had left, no one had stopped him from calling his daughter. So he knew it wouldn't explain enough for him to say, *I guess Cherise was some kind of rogue wave! Sucked me in and that was that. You know me, Mina: always a fool for a pretty girl!*

"I heard on the radio this morning," he said, suddenly feeling the toll of all the hours since morning, as though each one had taken a year off his life.

“I heard about this rogue wave off Point Reyes.”

Mina nodded, looking at Roger even though he wouldn't look at her, and waited for more.

“A rogue wave in the ocean. You've heard of those?”

Mina nodded again and offered a simple definition of the phenomenon that must have happened the night before, which explained some number of disappearances along the Pacific coastline each year. “It can happen anytime, no matter what the weather.”

“Huh.” Roger couldn't bring himself to drink the tea that smelled so pleasant. He wasn't ready to be soothed. But he kept one hand on the mug, letting it warm him a little. “It could've been anyone.” He'd been looking down at his own clumsy hands while Mina was looking at him. Now he met her gaze. “It could've been you.”

Six years. He had to look away. His head felt too heavy on his neck. She'd asked him when he got there, “Why are you here?” Why would she want him to be? But now she laid one of her hands across one of his on the crummy little table. “Aww, Dad,” she said. He was surprised at the tears beading in the corners of her eyes. He straightened in his chair, laughed an embarrassed laugh. “I guess I better be off then,” he said and stood up. “It's been a crazy long day!”

Mina stayed seated, tea in hand, and blinked at him as though someone

had just aimed a very bright light at her face.

“Yeah, I’m so tired. I better hit the hay! God only knows if my car’s where I left it. It’s probably getting towed right now! I don’t understand this city at all!”

“What are you doing?” Mina said.

“Getting out of your hair. I don’t want to be a bother.” Standing in the kitchen, trying to figure out what to do next, he felt cumbersome and ridiculous. Thank God she was alive, but she couldn’t want him to stay.

Mina started to laugh. He wasn’t sure what her laugh meant, how many feelings mixed into it. But it kept going. A lovely sound. How long had it been since he’d heard it?

Finally Mina caught her breath and said, “You mean to tell me you hopped on a plane first thing this morning and came all the way out here just to see if I was *alive*?”

He’d known all along it was a stupid thing to do, but he’d never thought of it as funny. “Well, yes.”

“And now you’re just going to leave? Before you eat supper? Drink your cup of tea? Have a freaking piece of toast? Three thousand-some miles and not even a slice of toast?”

“Toast?” Roger echoed. Then he said it again. And again, and then over and over and they laughed until tears came. Suddenly everything about toast

was hilarious.

Mina was the first to regain composure. She wiped her eyes with her thumbs, took a deep breath. “Dad? Where are you planning to go right now? Did you even book yourself a hotel?”

Roger shook his head, and they fell into laughter again. But the feeling of laughter gave way to something different this time.

“I’ll have to pull out my couch for you,” Mina said, gesturing to the futon in the tiny living room. “It’s just twin-size, but you won’t find a hotel this late in the day.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Roger said.

“I’ll get you some sheets.” Mina stood up. Roger was still standing in the middle of the little kitchen, suddenly not needing to leave but still at a loss for what to do next, so for a moment they stood there in each other’s way. When Roger finally stepped aside, he glimpsed a sad, lonesome look on Mina’s face. He must have missed the cue for whatever he was supposed to have said or done to prevent such a look. Now the chance had passed him by.

Roger watched Mina disappear into what must be her bedroom. Rather than continuing to stand oafishly in the kitchen, he decided to freshen up in Mina’s bathroom while she got the sheets. He did his best to straighten his clothes, and ran fingers through his “silver” hair. Somewhere, maybe even

right now, while Roger washed his face with lavender-scented soap and dried off on plush, smoky purple towels, somebody else's father was learning it was his child who had been swept away.

Mina was sitting on the futon next to a pile of fresh, folded sheets when Roger came back out. There was something in the way she looked at him that made him stand very still. She said, "You don't know how to apologize, do you?"

"What?"

Instead of answering him, she mimed a phone in her hand, punching a number in. "Hello, kiddo!" she said into the imaginary mouthpiece, practically hijacking the booming quality of Roger's voice. "It's your old man! Risen from the virtual dead!" She paused for effect, pointing to the imaginary phone, mouthing *It's my daughter* to Roger. "Hey, I was a real asshole and I'm sorry as hell! I flew all the way out here to see you!" Another pause. "That's right, I'm in the Bay City as we speak! Wadda ya know! How about I take you out for a nice supper, Sunshine? Your favorite place!" Another pause. Roger smiled, but when he started to speak, Mina covered the mouthpiece with one hand and shushed him. "That sounds great, Sunshine. You know, it's great to hear your voice again."

This time, instead of trying to speak, Roger walked over to Mina and pulled her to her feet. He tucked her into his chest, wrapped his arms around

her and said, "I'm so sorry, Mina. It really is great to hear your voice again, and your laugh. Did I ever tell you how much I love your laugh?"

"You're telling me now," she said.

He clutched her close to him, her hair tickling his nose. "I was so afraid I'd never see you again."

"But now here you are," she said, and she held him a little tighter.

Back at the kitchen table, Roger finally took a sip of the now-tepid tea. He closed his eyes, and relief washed over him like water.

Jody Hobbs Hesler lives and writes in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Charlottesville, Virginia. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Stealing Time: A Literary Magazine for Parents*, *Potato Eyes Journal*, *Leaf Garden Press*, *Pearl*, *Prime Number Magazine*, *The Blue Ridge Anthology*, *Writer's Eye Anthology*, and in VOX Press's tribute anthology, *A Short Ride: Remembering Barry Hannah*.